

40 Years After His Death, Hafizullah Amin Casts a Long Shadow in Afghanistan

40 years ago, the Soviet Union eliminated a communist rival from power in Afghanistan. Ever since, the country has prodded through a history of violence and political uncertainty.

By **Christopher Solomon**

December 31, 2019



Credit: [Facebook/ Hafizullah Amin Ideological and Cultural Foundation](#)

The Tajbeg Palace's ruins are a ghostly sight on the outskirts of Kabul. By contrast the [Darul Aman Palace](#), recently restored to splendor, emotes a proud and hopeful future for Afghanistan. The Tajbeg's last resident, the notorious Hafizullah Amin, only ruled over Afghanistan for a mere three months, yet his legacy set the country on a long, sorrowful path of war, terrorism, and political upheaval. Today, as Afghanistan navigates the results of a contested election and revived peace talks with the Taliban, the long shadow of Afghanistan's 1979 and the short reign of Amin demonstrates how rival factions of the Afghan elite prompted a desperate

geopolitical gamble against the backdrop of the Cold War. The history of Amin shines a light on how far the country has come — and how far it still has to go.

The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), the communist party that ruled the country from 1978 until 1992, remains largely forgotten in Afghanistan's long story of bloodshed. The PDPA had two main factions, the Khalq (masses) and the Parcham (banner). Hafizullah Amin, who emerged as the leader in the radical Khalq faction, brutally eliminated his party rivals, forcibly disappeared thousands of Afghans, confounded the Soviet Union's leadership, and forced a series of foreign interventions that drastically sealed Afghanistan's fate for the next 40 years.

Amin was born in 1929 outside of Kabul. An ethnic Pashtun, he came from an intellectual background, having studied education at Columbia University in New York City, where he also adopted his Marxist ideology. After Mohammed Daoud

Khan toppled Afghanistan's monarchy in 1973, the PDPA grew in size and influence. However, Daoud Khan's new republic was short-lived. The communists were able to gain a succinct advantage within the military and overthrew Khan. Despite this victory, the party fell into disputes among itself. The hard-lined and disciplined Amin was soon dissatisfied with the PDPA's rule after the coup and outmaneuvered his predecessor and fellow Khalq faction member, [Nur Mohammad Taraki](#), by staffing the PDPA's Politburo with Amin loyalists. Leonid Brezhnev tried to prevent Taraki's murder, but Amin had him killed in October 1979, a move which deeply rattled the Soviets.

Both inside and outside of Afghanistan, Amin remains a very faint but ever present blip on the periphery of Afghan politics. A black and white mural [bears Amin's image](#), alongside a flowing script that reads, "The Great Afghanistan; from the Oxus River to the Abassin River. Martyr Hafizullah Amin." Amin continues

to exist outside of Afghanistan as well. His supporters gather in cozy European cafes and hold commemoration ceremonies complete with Afghan flags and his pictures plastered around the room. The speakers from [an event in January 2018](#) recalled not only Amin but his faction members, who were killed by the Soviets and Babrak Karmal's allies, and noted their sacrifices were righteous.

Afghans of the older generation still remember the days of Amin. Just like today's conspiracy narratives, including one that the United States created the so-called Islamic State group, similar tropes existed in 1979. Fahim, 67, a mining engineer at that time, thinks Amin was on the payroll of the CIA. "Whatever he did benefited the Americans, which proved he was an American chess piece. His actions caused a split inside the PDPA and weakened the party. As a second-in-chief of the party led by Nur Mohammad Taraki, he did everything arbitrarily and in a dictatorial manner," says Fahim. He adds that Amin's loyalists may have his

picture on their wall and some may call him a “patriot” but he was a “bloodthirsty ruler” whose savageries were later repeated by the notorious Hizb-e-Islami leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

Abdul Hadi, 63, was a university student at the time of Amin’s 100 days of rule in Afghanistan. “Today’s miseries all trace back to Hafizullah Amin’s actions,” he says, adding that Amin was a U.S.-trained man and an American pawn that resorted to forced disappearance and burying people alive, indiscriminately from any ethnic groups of the society, in order to incite the people against the Soviet-backed communist regime. He says he does not see any pictures of Hafizullah Amin, Nur Mohammad Taraki, or Babrak Karmal in shops and homes of the people. Taraki’s government was a relatively popular government and he was a better man, Hadi thinks. However, the situation became chaotic under Amin where scores of people took up the gun against the Soviet-backed regime and started a never-ending so-called jihad. The wave of

massacres by his regime paved the way for a nation-wide jihad and the subsequent uprising against Babrak Karmal, which consequently opened the door to the Soviet Army's invasion of Afghanistan, Hadi explains.

Ghulam Qadir, 65, recounts how Amin's assassination saved his life. Qadir had served as an army conscript under Taraki's administration and then he was assigned to serve his recent months of duty in central "detention center of the premiership" under Amin's rule. When Amin came to power, he killed anyone who was said to be against the revolution led by the regime. Qadir describes that the night before Amin was killed, he and his superiors inside the detention center received a new list of people to be arrested and executed, and he saw his own name on the list.

"If the incident of '6 Jadi' [Amin's assassination] did not happen, I would have been possibly been killed by Amin. If the Soviet troops did not eliminate Amin

that night, I would have lost my life the day after, since I was an army conscript,” Qadir says.

Qadir describes “ruthless Amin” as among the worst of Afghanistan’s communist leaders. Amin was called “bloodthirsty” by the people, but within the regime, he was called “Amin Saheb [which means Sir].” Qadir blames all of the communist leaders, along with the Mujahideen who fought against them, for the long-lasting civil conflict in Afghanistan.

Mohammad Zia Kosha, 58, a student at that time and now a teacher, remembers Amin as “bloodthirsty, but also a semi-modernizer who was still bound to ethnic traditional values.” He says the communist leaders, including Amin, were “anti-Islamic” figures. He believes that Amin was inclined in favor of the United States and his developing relations with Washington had provoked the Soviet Union to eliminate him in a planned military operation. These fears that [Amin had a connection to the CIA](#), along with

the revolution in neighboring Iran, prompted the military intervention that many in the Soviet leadership apparatus had long resisted.

Kosha says that the members of the PDPA had given Amin the title of “Commander of Revolution” but in the eyes of the people Amin and his aides were killers who murdered anyone they found suspected. Amin was called the “honest disciple” of Taraki, but then he was termed as the “wicked disciple” after killing Taraki in person. Khosha remembers that Amin’s intelligence aide, Asadullah Sarwari, had a popular catchphrase, *Ghamesha bokhor*, meaning to “take care of him,” that he used to order his subordinates to kill anyone they suspected.

Kosha also relays a funny story about Amin’s daughter and her love for superstar singer of the time [Ahmad Zahir](#). A daughter of Amin had agreed to marry her cousin on the condition that Zahir would perform at their wedding

reception. Amin accepted his daughter's condition and ordered the release of Zahir, who was in custody on domestic charges. It's said that Zahir was released and allowed to perform at the wedding and during the wedding hours, Amin's daughters met with Zahir "in private" for an hour.

Although some sectors of Afghanistan were initially relieved to see Amin's fall, it was the beginning of decades of instability for the country. His [Soviet-installed successor](#), Babrak Karmal, returned from exile in the former Czechoslovakia. He [released thousands from prison](#), but could not win public support. Kosha believes that the rise of Islamist and jihadist groups did not merely relate to Amin's [brutal rule](#); it was a jihad against the communist regime as a whole. In his view, the 40 years of conflict in Afghanistan was more the result of interference from Pakistan and the United States against communism in Afghanistan, he said.

Mohammad Hassan, 73, who today runs a property dealership, also describes Amin as a “bloodthirsty” man who indiscriminately massacred people from any strata of the society and from any ethnic group. He explains that Amin murdered anyone — from religious scholars to ordinary restaurant workers — suspected of being a rebel. He terms Amin’s short-lived presidency as the “darkest era” of communist rule, when people could not even reveal their personal secrets to their family members for fear of being delivered to Amin’s men. Amin and his communist colleagues chanted slogans for democratic governance but they plotted against the people behind the scenes, Hassan says. However, he saw one positive aspect in Amin’s regime, that there was no ethnic discrimination at all.

As [Afghans mark the 40th anniversary](#) of the Soviet’s intervention, modern-day peace talks move along with uncertainty. Rumors abound that [the Taliban will soon sign a ceasefire](#) with the United States

negotiators in Qatar. Following the controversial and long delayed election results, President Ashraf Ghani's victory announcement to his supporters noted that the path to power in Afghanistan would no longer be subjected to [the rule of the gun](#). Afghans desperately want peace and anxiously follow the ups and downs of the U.S.-Taliban peace process.

Meanwhile, the Tajbeg Palace [is slowly being rebuilt](#). Afghanistan now stands at the crossroads of peace and democracy, and Amin's history, like the palace, casts a long and uncertain shadow on the future.

Christopher Solomon is an analyst for a defense consultancy in the Washington, D.C. area. Follow him on Twitter [@Solomon_Chris](#).

The author would like to thank Farhad Zahedi, a media analyst based in Kabul, for conducting the interviews for this article.

You have read **1** of your **4 free articles** this month.